

A Statue for Mrs Davis?

by Laurence Scales

Up to the moment in June of its unveiling, argument raged over the placing of Mary Seacole's statue at St Thomas's Hospital outside Florence Nightingale's Museum. But is there is a place in London to celebrate a third Crimea nurse with backbone? Unlike Nightingale or Seacole her name is not one to lodge in the memory. She met Florence Nightingale but disliked her intensely.

Our new heroine is Elizabeth Davis (1789–1860), known as Betsy. She never knew exactly her own age. We know about Mrs Davis from a remarkable but often unverifiable piece of oral history gathered when, in old age, she was met by Welsh writer Jane Williams, living in London. Williams put her rambling account, made without papers or diaries, into as good order as possible, collecting testimonials and other letters of corroboration, and publishing the autobiography in 1857 with a stark appeal to readers. There were no pensions then.

'In the decline of life and with broken health, the Heroine of this narrative is left unprovided for.'

A photograph from 1857 shows her in a shawl and bonnet under which we see a smooth, dark muscular face with a large pointed nose. Mrs Davis died in Hoxton, to be buried in a pauper's grave (now with a modern headstone) at Abney Park Cemetery.

Davis was born Elizabeth Cadwaladr near Bala in Wales. She adopted the name Davis which was easier for the supercilious English to cope with. She ran away from home after her mother died and found her way into domestic service.

'A sudden thought occurred to me that I was not to stay there any longer, and that I must see something more of the world.'

It was a momentous decision in fulfilment of which she was heart-warmingly successful. With a small bundle of clothes she made her way to Liverpool and employment with a family in whose service she visited various parts of the British Isles and Europe. In 1816 her fiancé was killed in a shipwreck. She ran away from another engagement, this time to London. After further service (and yet another engagement) she embarked in 1820 for the West Indies.

On her return to London, she resolved to head east and found passage with Captain John Foreman, sole owner of the Denmark Hill (257 tons we find in Lloyd's Register). This took her as far east as Tasmania. With Captain and Mrs Foreman she saw Singapore, Valparaiso, Rio, Calcutta and Canton seeing many wonders, weathering many hazards and again fending off many suitors. Years passed in this manner and she accumulated some savings and was ready for a new start in life in London.

There, unfortunately, she was swindled out of every penny.

Insult came upon injury. One day Captain Foreman, in a temper, accused her of lying. Betsy took offence and quit instantly. She took up domestic service again in and around London, and worked at Guy's Hospital. In 1854 she read of the Battle of Alma in the Crimea.

"Oh!" said I, 'If I had wings, would I not go?'"

'Then again I read of Miss Nightingale preparing to take out nurses. I did not like the name of Nightingale.'

Having enlisted at a house in Belgrave Square she found herself at Scutari (at Istanbul) in short order amid piles of clothes and food in the hospital rotting for want of proper storage.

'I told [Miss Nightingale] I wished to go home if I could not go the Crimea, for I saw I was of no use where I was. I said I had no work to do.'

Her response put Betsy's Welsh blood up. She felt she was being treated like a dog.

'Every day, during my stay at Scutari, I, and the other nurses, dined on the filaments of the meat, which had been stewed down all night long to make soup for the patients.'

Miss Nightingale had a French cook, and three courses of the best of every kind of food were served up everyday at her table for Mr. and Mrs. Bracebridge, and her friends.'



Crimean War military hospital conditions. Wellcome Images.

continued...

A Statue for Mrs Davis? (cont).



Balaclava in 1830.



Roger Fenton's photo of Balaclava Harbour in 1855.

Confrontation worked and Betsy was soon bound for the casualty wards at Balaclava.

'I shall never forget as long as I live... I began to open some of their wounds. The first that I touched was a case of frostbite. The toes of both the man's feet fell off with the bandages.'

'It made me weep when I could not speak, to be understood, one religious word to the poor Maltese and Sardinians when they were dying.'

The disgraceful conditions eventually took their toll and Betsy became ill herself.

'The Calcutta sailed from Balaclava, and brought me back an invalid to England.'

Nightingale's success as a nurse has been somewhat exaggerated, her great work coming after the Crimean War. Though Nightingale and Mrs Davis grated on each other, it is clear that Betsy left with Nightingale's respect. Nightingale recommended her for a government gratuity of a year's pay.

About Laurence Scales

Laurence is a guide specialising in offbeat historical walking tours focusing on intriguing and amusing tales of discovery, invention and intelligence. He is a volunteer working at the Royal Institution for which he has devised walking tours, and also guides walks and tunnel tours for the London Canal Museum. Welcoming residents and visitors who want to look beyond the main London attractions he reveals a wealth of lesser known historic sites and offers a double-take on some famous ones. Please contact Laurence via his web site: <http://www.laurenceswalks.co.uk/>.